

A Woman Scorned

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Summary: Kurama-hime and Ryoko Mendo go head-to-head... with Tobimaro Mizunokoji as the prize!

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by Lanin D. Thomasma

(Based on the characters of Urusei Yatsura, created by Rumiko Takahashi)

The morning mists rose on a clearing in a vast grove of bamboo. Quietly, ethereally, two small figures seemed to materialize out of the fog. Suddenly they stopped. In the cool twilight, a distinct hammering could be heard.

"This way," one of the figures said quietly, hesitant lest the source of the distant sound should somehow hear.

Despite their wooden sandals, the two moved quietly through the brush, their way guided by the dull thuds that now grew louder and louder. As the morning sun began to break over the horizon, the two forms became more distinct. Their white robes stood out in sharp contrast to the blackness of their bodies. One moved more slowly, reaching up at times to absently stroke his long grey beard. The other held a small electronic sensing device, which emitted a low, subtle whine. The first rays of sunlight cast a bright reflection off their bright yellow beaks.

The younger figure switched off his device. The hammering was very close now.

Quietly, the two drew close to a clump of low bushes, drawing them aside for a better view of the source of the thudding sound. There, in a clearing, a young man was methodically hammering at a punching

bag which was mounted on the branch of a nearby tree. The bag had been specially reinforced, a measure made necessary by the fact that the hammering was being done with a baseball bat. Pinned to the bag was a photograph, of a face familiar to the two hidden observers.

"That's him?" whispered the white-bearded one.

"Yep," replied the other. "Wait until he turns around, then you'll see."

The elder watcher frowned dubiously. The young man didn't seem much to look at. His clothing was ragged, and horribly outdated. He looked as though he'd been kept frozen for one or two centuries, then released in the modern world. On the other hand, the equipment around him seemed to be new, and of the highest quality. The bats were aluminum, the balls brilliant white, their red stitching unfrayed. Scattered around the clearing was an assortment of new, expensive looking fitness gear, all centered around a primitive campfire. It was hard to tell the young man's build under his tattered clothing, but his movement implied an athletic grace.

The young man paused to sweep some of his long, unkempt hair out of his face. Grasping the opportunity, the younger observer tossed a pebble into the bushes to their left. Hearing the noise, the young man spun around, giving the two watchers a clear view of his face. A masterful, grim determination shone in the young man's starry eyes.

The white-bearded karas-tengu's beak dropped open. The younger crow-gnome watched his elder's face in satisfaction.

Tobimaro Mizunokoji stared into the distance for a moment. Then, deciding that it must have been some small animal, shrugged and returned to his exercise.

The two crow-gnomes crept quickly away from the clearing, until the younger could stand it no longer. "What did I tell you?" he burst out excitedly. "What did I tell you? Isn't he perfect? Once Her Highness catches a glimpse of those eyes, I tell you, it's in the bag. And what a build! Positively - in - the - bag!"

The old one nodded quietly, doing his best to hide his own excitement. No use giving the young upstart a bigger head than he already had.

"Back to the ship," he said, his mind busy with plans. "Princess Kurama must be informed at once."

"NO!" Princess Kurama hissed through clenched teeth. Her eyes fought back tears as a familiar mixture of fury and self-pity threatened to engulf her once again. "I will not subject myself to more humiliation. I won't hear of it! I don't even want to think of it! Never!" Fury was clearly gaining the upper hand. "Do you understand me clearly, Old One? NEVER!"

"But Your Highness," The old karas-tengu began again. The rest of the karas-tengu Mate-Location Task Force huddled in the corner of the

room. "This one is different. Yopparai-kun has located -"

"Yopparai!" The blue in Kurama's eyes flamed in a near-incandescence. She indicated the young crow-gnome, who clutched his electronic sensor protectively in front of himself. "That drunken fool! May I remind you that it was he who saddled me with that worthless no-account Moroboshi? And I am to take his word on yet another hopeless, idiotic throwback?" Her eyes cooled to a steely grey. "I - don't - think - so."

"Princess, I can understand the pain you must be feeling -"

"Oh, you can?" Once more, the tears pressed their way into Kurama's eyes. "You know nothing, old fool!" Her body shook as she began to pace the floor of her quarters. "Prospect after prospect - face after face - one male candidate after another - and where does it lead?" She suddenly turned on her old servant, her eyes wide. "Take that fiasco on Planet Elle. How many men do you suppose there were? Fifty thousand? A hundred thousand? And not one - NOT ONE - could be bothered to take a few moments out of chasing that - that red-headed VIXEN - for something so trivial as a simple MATING RITUAL!" Kurama crumbled as a wave of memory swept over her, then threw herself on her bed in tears. "It's me, isn't it? I'm too ugly - misshapen - hideous! Men avoid me in disgust, don't they?"

"Now, Your Highness," the old crow-gnome began. "That's not true. Why, you remember that Moroboshi and that young Mendo fellow both thought you were quite beautiful -"

"Oh, that's encouraging!" The princess tossed her head up in disgust. "A slack-jawed idiot and a spoiled dandy with claustrophobia! And I'm supposed to be flattered by THEIR opinions?"

"Princess, listen to me, please," the white-bearded chief spoke as soothingly as he knew how. "I know Yopparai has failed miserably in the past -"

"Oh, thanks," muttered the young crow-gnome under his breath.

"... but I've seen this prospect myself, and I must concur. If Your Highness could be persuaded just to take one look at him, I'm sure you'll agree -"

"Oh, for pity's sake!" The young karas-tengu could stand it no longer. He stepped up to join the elder servant, his wings outstretched for emphasis. "Your Highness, you've GOT to see this one. He's a hunk, I tell you, a veritable hunk!" He looked around, self-conscious for a moment. "So, all right, I've made a couple of bad calls. And I'll admit I've taken the odd nip or two too many. But I'm cold sober this time, Princess - you can count on me." He put a wing over his heart. "Honest! Just look at the fellow. That's all I'm asking."

Kurama, startled by Yopparai's sudden boldness, stared for a moment. Then her shoulders slumped, and she gave a small, resigned sigh.

"Oh, all right. Let me see him." She stared sadly into space and shook her head slowly. "After a hundred thousand - what's one more?"

"Darling, just where are we going?" Lum hovered curiously above Ataru as he slowly made his way up a steep incline. The lush foliage of the area made it rather hard going.

"What do you mean, we?" Ataru fumed, pausing to catch his breath. "For the last time, the invitation was for me. Me! Alone! Not you!"

"I know that, Darling." A sweet but knowing smile spread across Lum's face. "And that's exactly why I'm coming along. I don't know who sent it, but anyone who would ask you to come out into the forest alone must be up to no good. Logical, da-tcha?"

"What's so logical about that?" Ataru grumbled. "Megane and the others are constantly asking you to places by yourself."

"And don't you always come along anyway?"

Ataru stopped short, caught for a moment. "That's... well... that's different!" And with that, he crashed energetically on through the underbrush.

Lum watched him for a moment, her smile spreading, then sped up to join him.

"So? Where are we supposed to be going?"

Ataru sighed. Some things just weren't worth fighting over. "Well, according to the map, we're supposed to head northeast up this hill, then ten paces due south." He looked around as the ground leveled. "So, here's the top of the hill, now we turn south. Boy, the brush sure is thick around here. It's hard to see where it's safe to
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA-----!!!!" Ataru's voice faded as he crashed down the steep drop-off he had just stepped over.

"DARLING!" Lum cried, and sped off down the ravine after him.

The ordeal seemed interminable as Ataru bounced and tumbled downward. Only his natural resiliency saved him from any serious damage. Finally, he broke through a final screen of foliage, and landed in a meadow - surprisingly enough, on a pair of legs - legs that Ataru knew well!

"Shinobu!" Ataru grabbed the legs impulsively. "I'm saved!"

One second later, he found himself embedded upside down in a nearby tree trunk.

"You are such a pervert!" Shinobu shook out her hand in frustration. Ryuunosuke and Shutaro watched the action blandly.

"Leave it to Moroboshi to make the single most embarrassing entrance possible," Shutaro observed.

"Nice punch, though," Ryuunosuke remarked admiringly. "I'd never tell her this, but Shinobu's getting better all the time."

"Darling!" Lum hurried over to the tree, where Ataru lay in a heap. Immediately, the two were surrounded by Lum's Stormtroopers.

"Hey, Lum! You came, too!"

"Or was it you who invited us?"

"Yeah, what's this all about?"

"Megane," Ryuunosuke said, moving over to the small gathering. "This isn't one of your ideas, is it? You making another film, is that it?"

"No," Megane replied, puzzled. "I'm in the dark, same as the rest of you. All I know is that I was invited to come out here for a special occasion."

"We got the same invitation," Paama said, taking out an elegantly-calligraphed note. "What about you, Shinobu?"

"The same," Shinobu said, taking out hers. She held it up. "Here it is."

"Wait a minute!" Shutaro said, his body suddenly tense. "May I see that, please, Shinobu-san?" He took the note from Shinobu, and stared at the kanji written on it, his face suddenly growing pale. "None of you would've written this. There's only one person I know with such a deft hand, and that's -"

"Big Brother! There you are!" Ryoko's voice drifted gaily across the meadow, above the steady "Hut, hut, hut" of the kuroki carrying her palanquin. As they reached the clearing where the others were gathered, she stepped daintily down to the ground. "Ah, you've brought the others, I see. How wonderful!"

"Hey, Ryoko!" Ataru sprang to his feet, restored fully by the sound of a female voice. With a noble look on his face, he sidled up next to Ryoko. "How touching that you'd invite me here to join you. Let's lose these others and find some place where we can be alone." His face broke into a leering grin. "How about it, babe?"

"Darling!" "Moroboshi!"

Lum's and Shutaro's reactions were simultaneous, but physics were on Lum's side. Her bolt hit Ataru first, knocking him just out of reach of Shutaro's blade. Ryoko, having seen both reactions coming, had stepped lightly out of the way.

"Oh, come now, Ataru-san," she said, tilting her head to smile at Ataru, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he was now lying in a heap at her feet, still smouldering. "We wouldn't want anyone to feel left out, would we?" With that, she turned to welcome the others. "I'm glad you all could make it. If you'll all come with me, we'll get things underway." Climbing back into her palanquin, she set off. Shutaro followed, his katana drawn, and a watchful eye on Ataru. He needn't have worried. Lum, still crackling with high tension, remained no more than a few inches from Ataru, with Shinobu, Ryuunosuke and the Stormtroopers following at a respectful distance.

The small group continued in this order for some time, their path through the underbrush being neatly cleared by Ryoko's kuroki.

"Moroboshi," Shutaro hissed, somehow hesitant to break the silence. "Must you pound your feet so? Your thudding is beginning to give me a headache!"

"Whaddaya mean? I'm not doing a thing!"

"Wait - you're right," Megane spoke, looking around. "Whatever that is, it isn't footsteps. It's much slower than that." He turned quickly to his fellow Stormtroopers. "Kakugari, you're not pounding on Chibi again, are you?" Kakugari looked back, puzzled, Chibi's head still tucked neatly under his arm. The sound continued. "No - it's still there."

"It sounds like it's coming from over there," Shinobu said, pointing to a group of trees.

"You're right, Shinobu-chan," Ryoko said cheerfully. "And that's where we're headed right now."

The group broke through a final barrier of foliage to find themselves in an odd combination of forest clearing and fitness center. Ryoko's palanquin still shielded the group from viewing the source of the sound they now heard clearly. Suddenly, the kuroki stopped, and with a quick but gentle motion, lowered the palanquin to the ground. With that motion, the full panorama was revealed. There was Tobimaro, still engrossed in hammering his punching bag, too intent to pay attention to the sounds behind him. A picture of Shutaro remained pinned to the bag.

Shutaro took an involuntary step forward. "Ton-chan!" he blurted out.

Tobimaro spun around in shock. "Shu-chan!" he gasped, wide-eyed. "What are you doing here? How dare you trespass on my secret training grounds?"

"Never mind that! What do you think you're doing with my picture?"

"This is my sanctuary! My shrine to the Holy Endeavor of Sportsmanship! How did you find it? AND WHAT ARE THESE WOMEN DOING HERE? You can't desecrate this hallowed ground with the - "

"Tobimaro-sama!" Ryoko broke from the group and, before Tobimaro had a chance to react, threw her arms around his neck. "I'm so happy you're here! You make everything complete!"

Tobimaro stood stiff as a board, his face ghostly white. "Ryoko-chan... uh... I..." he stammered. "I... you... uh... Ryoko-chan... how... uh... say,uh... Ryoko-chan..."

"Now, now," Ryoko put a finger gently on Tobimaro's lips. "Not a word, Dear One. Don't spoil my surprise." She turned, releasing Tobimaro, who quietly slid to the ground.

"Welcome, everyone," Ryoko smiled warmly to the group as a whole. Ataru, standing at Shutaro's side, assumed a special meaning for him and started forward, only to find the Mendo family heirloom sword held threateningly under his nose. He grinned and scratched his head disarmingly at Shutaro, whose watchful eyes remained fixed on his sister - the less predictable and more dangerous of the two. "I've invited you here to partake in a special field day. We all know the importance of physical fitness. Well, in the spirit of health and - sportsmanship -" Here she cast an endearing glance at Tobimaro. "- I've arranged a series of competitive events. Any or all of the men present may compete, and of course -" Ryoko folded her hands in front of her. " - there is a prize for the winner."

"Any of the men?" Shinobu asked curiously.

"Why, of course, Shinobu-chan," Ryoko replied with a friendly smile. "And while I would never wish to exclude you and Lum-chan from any of the fun, you must agree that the men are much more fairly matched with one another in strength and ability."

"She's got a point there," Ryuunosuke said, shrugging. "I'm afraid you and Lum would walk off with all the honors."

"I knew you'd understand," Ryoko said gratefully. "Besides, there's also the nature of the prize to be considered. I'm afraid it, too, limits the running to an extent."

"And just what is the prize?" Shutaro asked, his voice tensing despite himself.

Ryoko cast her eyes down coyly. "An evening with me," she said.

Kurama was fuming. "I can't believe that you would even dare to bring those people within my view once again." As they watched the action on screen, they could clearly see Ataru, Shutaro and the others. They couldn't hear the conversation, Yopparai having cut off the audio by mistake, but it was evident that they were upset about something.

"Please have patience, Princess," the old chief said cheerfully, then whispered to Yopparai, "Where is he?"

"I can't get a good shot of him. Everyone else is getting in the way."

"Do I need to tell you what Her Majesty is going to do to us if you don't get a fix on him soon?"

"Enough of this!" Kurama growled, stamping her foot in frustration. "I'll be in my quarters. And I don't want to be disturbed again." She started out of the room, the old chief following after her.

"Princess, please, just wait a few more -"

At that moment, Tobimaro, in response to something Shutaro had said,

leapt back from the rest of the group, his eyes wide.

"GOTCHA!" Yopparai crowed triumphantly, then spun around in his seat. "There you are, Princess! Take a look at that!"

Kurama wheeled in fury, the retort on her lips cut off by the sight of Tobimaro's face, framed fully in the viewscreen. A sudden shaft of sunlight caught the stars in his eyes, casting an iridescent glint.

Kurama's knees suddenly grew weak. Her eyes glowing, she sank slowly to the floor, her servants stepping back in hushed silence. Even Yopparai was stunned by the look in his mistress' face.

"He's - he's - beautiful!" the Princess said breathlessly.

Meanwhile, in the clearing, Tobimaro was striking a delicate balance between panic and disbelief as Shutaro faced off with him.

"What do you mean, take on Moroboshi?"

"I mean just that," Shutaro hissed intensely, his knuckles white on the hilt of his sword. "And you had better win! I don't care what the game is, if you don't win hands down, I swear you'll never see the sun set."

As was to be expected, Ataru had volunteered immediately following Ryoko's announcement, despite Lum's and Shinobu's loud protestations. Lum's Stormtroopers were conspicuously silent; Shutaro's instantly violent reaction to Ataru fairly stifled any outside chance of anyone else casting in their lot. A minor distraction had taken place when Shutaro, forgetting himself for a moment and reacting to sight alone, had told Ryuunosuke to stay out of the running. Ryuunosuke's forceful reply, "Of course not, you clod! I'M A WOMAN!" punctuated with a well-placed uppercut, had brought Shutaro back to his senses. Now, he had turned to the only remaining possible contender.

"Listen, Ton-chan, whatever has gone on or will go on between you and Ryoko, the thought that that pervert Moroboshi might have even the slightest chance of getting at my sister is enough to curdle my blood! For the love of God, you can't let that happen!"

"Why, Big Brother, just what are you assuming I was going to do?" Ryoko asked archly, her eyebrows raised innocently.

"That's beside the point! It's what HE was going to do!" Shutaro pointed at Ataru, whose nose had started bleeding as he envisioned an answer to that very question.

"You see?" Shutaro turned back to Tobimaro, pleading. "Look at the face of that... that PERVERT! You want to let that loose on your betrothed? Is that your sense of honor? Is that the kind of man you are?"

Tobimaro looked at Ataru, then back at Shutaro, eyes wide. "Well, no, of course not -"

"Tobimaro-sama!" Ryoko let out a cry of delight and hugged Tobimaro once again. "How noble! To risk your life in battle for my honor. Such a valiant act! Such a heroic gesture!"

One word filtered through into Tobimaro's whirling mind. "Risk - WHAT?" he said.

Suddenly, a rush of wind tore through the trees around the clearing, tearing leaves from the branches, and swirling them up and around the small gathering. The sound of the wind rose in volume into a roar, and the swirl of leaves parted to reveal a familiar conch-shaped vessel hovering above them.

"Please pardon the interruption," blared a loud voice from the ship. "But this will take no more than a few minutes. Miss," the voice addressed Ryoko. "If you would kindly unhand the young man -"

"That ship looks familiar," Lum said, staring. Instinctively, she took a defensive stance in front of Ataru. "Darling, stay back!"

"I recognize it, too," Shinobu said, her body tense. "It looks like... it is... the crow-goblins!"

"Kurama-hime!" Shutaro said breathlessly, his memory racing back to their last meeting.

"Oh, baby! Kurama! It's been too long!" Ataru sprang towards the ship, only to be tackled by Lum.

"Could we oblige the demon-wife to restrain her husband for a few minutes?" the voice intoned politely.

"Big Brother," Ryoko said, stepping over to Shutaro. "Do you know these people?"

Ryoko's movement gave the karas-tengu the opening they were waiting for. With a sudden rush, a cyclone-like vortex shot out from the the ship, straight at Tobimaro. Before anyone could react, the spiral sucked him right off his feet, and in a matter of seconds, pulled him into the open portal of the ship.

"Tobimaro-sama!" Ryoko cried as the portal clanged shut.

"Thank you for your cooperation," the voice intoned from the ship. "The subject will be returned as soon as the Mating Ritual has been completed. Due to circumstances, we regret we cannot invite you to attend the festivities. Have a nice day." And with that, the ship rose and shot off over the horizon.

"Good lord! Ton-chan?" Shutaro said, his katana dropping from his hands in shock.

Ataru broke free from Lum's grasp and started after the now departed ship. "Wait! I'm the Designated Mate! You can't do this to me! Kurama baby! Waaait!"

"Darling! COME BACK HERE!" Lum started off after him, then checked herself. "What am I doing? It's not as though he was going to catch them." She turned and folded her arms petulantly as Ataru's form receded in the distance. "Let him wear himself out. Serves him

right!"

"Mendo-san!" Shinobu turned to Shutaro. "We've got to do something! Isn't there anything..." Her voice trailed off as she noticed that Shutaro had not moved. He still stood, his eyes wide, his sword at his feet.

"Ton-chan?" he repeated. "How could she?" He turned to Shinobu, not really seeing her. "How could she choose him over me?"

Shinobu's response drove him waist-deep into the ground.

"Shinobu..." Ryoko said quietly, as though nothing had happened.

"Oh, Ryoko, I'm so sorry!" Shinobu said. Lum and Ryuunosuke gathered around her as well. The Stormtroopers, overwhelmed by the goings-on around them, were still keeping a respectful distance. In fact, at this point they were gathered under a bush some hundred yards from the scene.

"Don't worry, Ryoko. I know what she's after. We'll get him back," Ryuunosuke said encouragingly.

"So da-tcha! I can track that ship easily. And if that cheap nymphomaniac thinks she's going to get away with this, she's got quite a surprise coming. She almost stole my darling; she'll not steal anyone else's!"

"Shinobu..." Ryoko said once more, even more quietly. Something in the tone of her voice stilled the other three girls. They stared at her for a moment.

"Ryoko - " Ryuunosuke said hesitantly.

"Shinobu..." Ryoko said once more, then continued, her voice still hushed. "Did I hear wrongly? Or did they say something about a mating ritual?"

The three girls looked at one another. Each one waited for the others to speak first.

"Ryoko," Shutaro said, extracting himself from the hole Shinobu had driven him into. He picked up his katana and struck a heroic pose. "Please don't be upset. We will find a way to get Ton-chan back, if you'll only..." His voice trailed off as he realized that his sister wasn't looking at him. She was staring out where the ship had disappeared.

"Big Brother," she said after a moment's silence. "Could I speak with you when you return home, please?" She turned to the others with a slightly distracted air. "You must excuse me." And with that, she climbed into her palanquin and whispered a curt command to her kuroki.

"My," Lum said as the palanquin receded in the distance. "She certainly took that well."

"Yes, she did," Shinobu said, tilting her head a bit. "I expected

something somewhat more - well - theatrical."

"So did I," Shutaro said, his voice tense. "And that's exactly what's scaring me now."

The old chief watched as the princess moved about the room. "It's amazing," he thought, "but she looks years younger. She's as excited as a teenager." The thought suddenly hit him. "She is a teenager, isn't she?" He shook his head. "The pressures of her position, all that responsibility she carries... it's certainly taken its toll. I keep forgetting how young she really is."

"Oh, stop shaking your head, Old Grandfather." Kurama patted the old chief's head affectionately. The day's proceedings had transformed her completely. "Everything will be all right." She swept over to a beautiful white dress mounted prominently on a clothing dummy. "And it won't be long now." She took in a long, deep breath. "Oh, what a man! You were right, Old Grandfather. He's perfect. Think of the babies I'll be able to make with him."

"Oh, yes, indeed, your Highness," the chief nodded encouragingly.

"And I hope they all have those same starry eyes. Oh, wouldn't that be wonderful?" Kurama clapped her hands and giggled in excitement ("Princess Kurama, giggling?" the chief thought in bemusement. "OUR Princess Kurama?"). "Oh, how is he? Is he settling in all right? Will he be ready for the Mating Ritual?"

"Oh, yes, your Highness, he'll be ready," the chief said quickly. "He's settling in fine. Just fine. In fact," He began to edge toward the door. "Why don't I just look in on him now, just to make sure?"

"You do that. And Old Grandfather?"

The chief stopped at the door. "Yes, your Highness?"

"Be sure to thank Yopparai-kun for me."

"Of course, your Highness," the chief said, and closed the door to Kurama's quarters behind him. He then turned, and as quickly as he could manage, hurried through the corridors of the ship to where Tobimaro was being held. Two karas-tengu stood guard outside the door, heavy weapons in their hands.

"Any progress?" The chief asked, breathless and concerned.

"None," one of the guards reported. "He still won't let us near him."

"Oh, dear," the chief said sadly as the guards let him in the room.

Tobimaro was standing, back flat, against the far wall. He had managed to grab a broomstick, and was waving it in front of him. His 'handlers' were keeping their distance (fortunately, for all the swinging, Tobimaro hadn't actually hit anyone), and doing their best

to calm him down. The old chief tapped Yopparai on the shoulder, and took him aside to a corner of the room.

"Nothing yet?" the chief asked.

"No," Yopparai replied in frustration. "He hasn't changed. Demands he be released immediately, etcetera, etcetera, we have no right to bla bla bla, you know the drill."

"All right," the chief said, stroking his beard as he studied Tobimaro intently. "Let me try something." He called to the others. "Everyone please move back. Give the young man some room." As the others moved to join Yopparai, the chief took a few steps forward, hands outstretched in a peaceful manner. He was immediately confronted by the end of the broomstick as Tobimaro struck a defensive stance.

"You must be in charge of these demons!" Tobimaro shouted, his eyes still wide with panic. "I demand that you bring me back immediately!"

"Now, look, young man," the chief began. "We're not demons. We don't mean you any harm. If I could just explain -"

"Oh, no you don't!" Tobimaro interrupted, his broomstick still waving wildly. "Don't try to pull your devilish little tricks on me!" He pointed in what he hoped was the direction they had come from. "Now bring me back. There's a woman's honor at stake, and I've got to get back there!"

"Now, look, young man, I know this is sudden - " The chief stopped short. "I beg your pardon?" he asked puzzled.

"You heard me," Tobimaro said, his eyes flashing. "I'm engaged in a duel for the sake of a woman's virtue, and I'm bound by my honor to go through with it!" Actually, he wasn't sure exactly why he had said that. But it was out, and it seemed to have had an effect. Tobimaro decided to stick with it.

The chief looked at the others. "You mean," he said, thinking quickly, "that a matter of honor is more important to you than..." He wasn't sure how to continue. "... than the circumstances that... well... brought you here?"

Now it was Tobimaro that was stuck. Actually, having been kidnapped was indeed the more important point in his mind. But it didn't seem very noble to say that right at the moment. And it wouldn't be right to let that Moroboshi have his way with Ryoko. Good Lord - Ryoko! She didn't really intend to - just what did she have in mind? Oh, and how galling it was for Shu-chan to have to call to mind his sense of honor. I mean, of all people, to be the one who -

"Young man?" the old chief said. The others had gathered around him, puzzled at Tobimaro's sudden lack of movement.

"What?" Tobimaro had forgotten for a moment where he was. "OH YES! Honor! Virtue! Duel! Woman's - uh - return to - " His voice ran out, and he gave the broomstick a few absent-minded swings. "Uh... what were we talking about?"

"We were talking about your sense of honor." At a gesture from the old chief, two karas-tengu wheeled a chair forward, while Yopparai deftly slid the broomstick out of Tobimaro's hands. "Tell me, my friend..." The chief beckoned Tobimaro to have a seat, which, after a moment's hesitation (wasn't he threatening them with something a short while ago? Where was this conversation going?), he did. "Just how important is honor to you? I mean, if I knew of a young lady who, say, desperately needed help - and I mean the kind of help only some strong, courageous, noble young man such as yourself could provide - would that be something you could see yourself getting behind?" Another karas-tengu had come with a cup of tea, which the old chief held up to Tobimaro with a wide smile.

"Well..." Tobimaro sipped the tea, still rather confused. "Well, I don't... I mean, a warrior's honor is... There's a heritage of... Yes, I suppose..." He looked at the chief more closely. "You say someone needs help?"

"Oh, yes!" The chief said emphatically. "Desperately, as I say. Now, I can tell you're the kind of person who wouldn't hesitate to help if he was needed. Why, that strong chin, those broad shoulders... you've got 'hero' written all over you."

Tobimaro blushed. These creatures were obviously quite observant. Still, it wouldn't be proper to simply agree with them. "Well, a true man of honor doesn't take such things into account, you know." A nagging thought still stuck in his mind. "I really do need to get back, though. I mean, Moroboshi is capable of anything -"

"Exactly, and that's precisely our concern," the old chief said, grateful for an opening. "Now, you're not a friend of that Moroboshi fellow, are you? I noticed that he was back there with you."

"Me? Oh, no!" Tobimaro said, a little startled. "You see, he -"

"I understand." The chief smiled and refilled Tobimaro's teacup. "And I agree. No poor, innocent girl should have to find herself at the mercy of such a lecherous beast. Not when there's a stalwart, heroic young man to prevent it." The chief looked away, musingly. "Of course, your young lady did seem to have a number of young men who could defend her. The one with the sword, for instance."

"That's her brother. He's not -"

"Ah, how blessed to have a brother to stand up for you," the chief sighed, cutting Tobimaro off. "If only the young lady in my care was so blessed." He turned tear-filled eyes to Tobimaro. "But sadly, there is no one." He clutched at Tobimaro's sleeve. "No one to come to her aid and protection. No one to defend her honor. She is entirely alone!"

"No one at all?" Tobimaro asked, eyes wide, his own predicament forgotten for the moment. This sounded serious!

"No one," the old chief continued. The hook was set - now to reel him in. "And without the kind offices of a man of honor such as yourself - why, she'll be left in the hands of that... that..." He broke down in tears. "Oh, it's a fate she doesn't deserve! What will we do? What WILL we DO?"

"Here, now - don't cry," Tobimaro started to pat the old chief on the back. "I'll help you. Of course I will. Don't cry, please."

The old chief looked up, adulation streaming from his eyes. "You'll help us? Truly?" He grabbed at Tobimaro's sleeve. "Oh, how we'll sing your praises if you'll do us this one favor." He turned to the others in the room. "Do you hear? This brave young hero is willing to lend his mighty hand to come to our aid! What say you, gentlemen?"

The others broke out into loud cheers, and Tobimaro felt his heart swell as he stood to receive the ovation. Seldom had he felt so capable, so powerful, as he did at that moment.

"Just leave everything to me, my friends," He said expansively, evoking yet another cheer. Then he turned to the old chief, chest swelling with pride. "All right, good sir, what do I do?"

When Shutaro arrived home, he was met at the door by the chief retainer of the Mendo family. "Master Shutaro, your presence is requested by The Lady Your Mother and Miss Ryoko. If you please, they are waiting with their guest in the Map Room."

"Guest?" responded Shutaro absently. His mind was busy wondering what Ryoko could be up to.

"The Lady Mizunokoji, Master Shutaro," The retainer replied.

Shutaro stopped to stare at the old man, his face suddenly ashen. Then he dashed off in the direction of the Map Room.

When he got there, he paused for a moment to compose himself, and found himself face to face with his father.

"Hello, my boy," the elder Mendo said in a guarded tone. He tilted his head toward the door. "They've been waiting for you."

"What's happening, Father?" Shutaro asked, his voice hushed. His father hesitated before answering, then sighed.

"A word of advice, Shutaro. Get in, give them whatever they want, and get out - as quickly as you can." Mendo-sama fixed his son's eyes with a meaningful look. "Your mother's not in the best of moods."

Shutaro took in the full import of his father's words, swallowed slowly, and opened the door. He found The Ladies Mendo and Mizunokoji, together with Ryoko, seated at a large table covered with charts. Ryoko was sitting demurely, allowing the two adults to carry the conversation, answering only when addressed. For all that, though, Shutaro noticed that most of the notations on the maps were Ryoko's.

"Ah, there you are, son." The Lady Mendo gestured to Shutaro to come forward. "First, I would like a brief explanation of just who this Kurama individual is, and in what context you know her." She eyed her son coldly. "You may speak candidly. I do not wish to withhold any

information from Mrs. Mizunokoji."

Shutaro took a deep breath, and carefully outlined the circumstances of his first encounter with Kurama, delicately omitting any mention of the Princess' Mating Cubicle, or his bout of claustrophobia while inside.

"I see," The Lady Mendo said, eyeing her son carefully. "I suspect there is more, but that will do for the time being." She squared her shoulders and looked straight ahead. "We will discuss your questionable liaisons at some other time. It is sufficient at this point that you have acted shamefully, disgraced not only the Mendo family, but the Mizunokojis as well, and seriously endangered your sister's future happiness." She closed her eyes painfully. "My one consolation is that your betrothed, Asuka, is not on hand to be shamed by your dissolute behavior."

Mrs. Mizunokoji spoke in agreement. "I thank Providence that she is away visiting her aunt in Osaka. She is far too delicate to withstand such a shock."

Without moving, The Lady Mendo addressed her peer, her voice taking on a subtle note of comfort. "You may rest assured, Honored Friend, that your son will be restored to you unharmed and unsullied."

"Lum has assured me that she will be able to track the kidnappers," Ryoko said deferentially, her eyes remaining downcast.

"I promise you that I will do all within my power to atone for my actions," Shutaro said, hoping to strike the ideal balance between ferventness and contrition.

"You most assuredly shall," The Lady Mendo said quietly. "To begin with, you shall cede to Ryoko your command codes for our private air force."

Shutaro couldn't help staring at his mother. "Mother - ?"

"It's all right, Big Brother," Ryoko said quietly. "Father has already turned command of our ground forces over to Mother." She glanced over at her mother. "This is a matter for the women of the family to attend to."

"Quite correct," The Lady Mendo enjoined, nodding graciously to her daughter. "Make the necessary arrangements, please, son. We shall discuss the rest later." When Shutaro hesitated, she turned to fix him with a deceptively calm gaze. "Something else?" she asked.

"No, Mother," Shutaro said, his voice strained. "I'll - just be going." Paying his respects to Mrs. Mizunokoji, he left as quickly as he could without drawing too much attention. The three had already returned to their planning.

"Still in one piece, I see, my boy," Mendo-sama remarked as Shutaro emerged from the room. The two fell into step side by side.

"Aren't you worried, Father?" Shutaro asked hesitantly. "With Ryoko in charge of the air forces, she's capable of anything. And what if Mother should deem it necessary to resort to her nuclear capabilities?"

"We shall have to pray fervently that this - Kurama, is it? - will see sense in time." Mendo-sama shook his head sadly. "Poor Tobimaro. What he must be going through right now."

"Yes," Shutaro said, his own memories taking his thoughts in a different direction. "Knowing Ton-chan, I can imagine he's having his share of difficulties."

"I HAVE TO WHAT?" Tobimaro was back against the wall. The broomstick no longer handy, he held his hands in front of him in his best defensive gesture, the panic in his eyes stronger and more profound than any he had exhibited to that point.

The other karas-tengu looked at their chief in shock, who returned their gaze with a puzzled look of his own. Things had been going so well up to that point. What happened? Suddenly, the old chief remembered Ataru Moroboshi's first reaction to being chosen as the Designated Mate. "Of course! How silly of me!" he cried, and quickly dug out a picture of the princess, holding it up encouragingly. "Not to worry, my friend, Princess Kurama is really quite beautiful. Look," he said, the panic notable in his voice. "Isn't she lovely? Now, just calm down and mate with her, please!"

"Noooo!" Tobimaro moaned, cringing back from the picture, his eyes wide as saucers. "You don't understand! I'm dedicated to the Holy Discipline of Sportsmanship! Sports is my life - my being! I can't allow myself to consort with women. I must not touch a woman - no matter -" He suddenly saw the photo for the first time. " - how gorgeous!" he said in amazement.

"You see? Now please just loosen up for a bit," the chief pleaded as Tobimaro started struggling again. "One time isn't going to ruin your athletic career! Please -"

Suddenly, The ship was rocked by a tremendous explosion, spilling everyone to the floor. Before they could get up again, they felt the ship lurch into movement around them. Shortly afterwards, a karas-tengu burst into the room. "Chief! You're needed on the bridge! We've got company!"

"Oh, no!" The chief threw up his hands in frustration. He turned to Yopparai. "Keep him here. Calm him down if you can." As quickly as he could, he made his way to the bridge. The original explosion had been followed by other, more distant impacts, as the ship went into evasive maneuvers. "Status!" the chief demanded as he entered the command area.

"Only ground forces so far," one of the crew reported. "We can clear their artillery, but radar's picking up a strong force of incoming bogies."

"Head for the forest," the chief said grimly. "When we're out of range of their guns, drop to ground level. We can't outrun them, but we should be able to lose them in the trees. We'll have the Ritual over and done with before they can find us."

"We'll need enough of a clearing to set up the Mating Cubicle," an

aide said hurriedly.

"Lay in a course," the chief said. "I think I know just the spot."

Shutaro led Lum and Ataru through the brush, following the same course they had followed earlier. "Mendo," Ataru said, doing his best to keep up. "What makes you think they'd come back here, of all places? I mean, this is where they grabbed Mizunokoji in the first place."

"Call it a hunch," Shutaro said, clearing the brush ahead of him with his katana. It wasn't really necessary, but after a day of being left on the periphery, it felt good to be using his sword for something. "Lum-san," he said, not turning. "Have you picked up anything yet?"

"No," Lum replied, swinging a small device in a slow arc. "They've either powered down, or they've figured out how to jam my tracker. In any case, they're not registering. Gomen-cha." She shook her head apologetically, then looked back at her device. "Wait a minute!" She touched a few buttons, then held the tracker up in the direction they were going. "That's it! You were right! Their main engines are shut down, but we're close enough to pick up their subsystems. Your hunch paid off - they're dead ahead!"

The three hurried on towards the clearing. When they broke through the final screen of growth, they saw that most of Tobimaro's exercise equipment had been cleared out of the way. Across the clearing, through the trees, they could make out the form of the karas-tengu ship. And in the middle of the clearing, in the space made available, stood a structure they recognized immediately.

"The Mating Cubicle," the three breathed as one.

"No time to contact my troops," Shutaro said grimly. "It's up to us." Brandishing his katana, he drew a deep breath. "Forward on my command!"

"WHAT?" Ataru burst out, wide-eyed. "A banzai charge? Who do you think you are, Toshiro Mifune? If you think I'm going to follow you in some nutty suicide charge, you're crazy!"

"Look!" Lum whispered, pointing towards the ship, where a hatch had opened. Out of the hatch, a group of karas-tengu led a still-struggling Tobimaro, followed by a white-clad Princess Kurama. On the princess, the fabric of the dress proved to be nearly transparent, revealing virtually every contour of Kurama's body beneath, but for key points artfully concealed by extra folds in the design.

"BABE!" Ataru shouted, lunging forward.

"BAKA!" Lum cried, plunging after him.

"BANZAI!" Shutaro bellowed, charging along behind.

The charge took everyone by surprise. Ataru barreled into Kurama, and

the two went rolling, Kurama doing her best to fend off Ataru's groping hands, aided inadvertently by Lum, who was trying to pin Ataru's arms down while pouring high voltage into both of them. Shutaro, meanwhile, began swiping at the crow-gnomes, who scattered in all directions, recognizing that this adversary had a much better command of his weapon than Tobimaro had of his broomstick. Tobimaro, suddenly turned loose and panicked beyond rational thought, reacted to the commotion by dashing headlong towards the only shelter he could see - the Mating Cubicle.

Suddenly, the sound of an engine filtered through the noise. As everyone looked up, a single airplane shot by over the clearing. Through the trees, they could see the plane bank into an almost vertical climb, its gull-shaped wings shining in the sunlight. Of everyone on the ground, Shutaro alone recognized instantly the outline of the aircraft.

"My vintage Stuka!" He shouted. "Ryoko! You're not going to -"

As the plane reached the apex of its climb, the canopy slid open, and an amplified voice wafted down to the ears of those below. "Tobimaro-sama!" The voice was indeed Ryoko's. "All is forgiven, my love! I bear no grudges!"

With that, a figure, dressed in white, leapt from the plane. As Ryoko's parachute began to open, the plane itself pivoted downward, and began slicing its way towards the ground. Everyone stared in horror as the Stuka, with its unique signature whine, picked up speed - diving straight at the Mating Cubicle.

"DUUUCK!" Yopparai screamed, as everyone leapt for cover.

The scream of the plane rose to a peak as it barrelled into the cubicle with a deafening roar. The force of the ensuing explosion threw Tobimaro straight up into the air, conveniently in the path of Ryoko's descent. As Ryoko had thought to provide herself with an extra large parachute, she caught Tobimaro tightly in her arms, and held on as the two of them drifted to the ground - dropping him only in the final few feet to facilitate her own safe landing.

As Ryoko unsnapped the bindings of her parachute and gathered the moaning form of Tobimaro into her arms once more, Shutaro came running to them, a murderous look on his face.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," Shutaro said to his sister, his hair disheveled and his clothing singed from the heat of the explosion. "That was a rare vintage Stuka dive bomber. I doubt there are more than three left intact in the entire world. How am I supposed to explain having that count reduced to two?"

"Now, now, Big Brother, you worry too much," Ryoko said tenderly, resting Tobimaro's head on her shoulder. "Look at how peaceful he is. Isn't he precious?"

"I can't believe this!" Kurama strode up, a blanket cast about her. The combination of Lum's electric shocks and the force of the explosion had disintegrated the already flimsy fabric of her dress, and the karas-tengu had quickly fetched an alternative covering from the ship. Kurama huddled in the blanket, shivering from the cold outside and her own rage within. She fixed Ryoko with a baleful glare

and spoke in icy, measured tones.

"Fine," she said. "Keep the man. You've destroyed my Mating Cubicle, ruined my chances of fulfilling my duty to produce a new generation, and very likely doomed my people to extinction." She took a deep breath and tossed her head up proudly. "Well, that's... just... FINE! We'll show you all that we can meet our fate with honor and dignity." She turned and paused to cast a narrow-eyed look at Shutaro, who had sprung back to his normal immaculate appearance. "Don't... even... think... about... it," she growled, and stalked past a shaken Lum and a still-groggy Ataru to her ship. At the entrance, she stopped to point dramatically at Ryoko. "And I hope we all come back to haunt you from our graves!" She intoned forcefully.

Unfortunately, the motion of extending her arm also swept the blanket away from that side of her body, revealing more of Kurama than she had intended to. Ataru, sensing rather than seeing bared skin, immediately snapped to full consciousness, and began struggling to free himself from Lum, who was still holding him tightly. Kurama, suddenly self-aware, blanched, and clutched her blanket more tightly around her. "Get me out of here," she hissed, and dashed into the ship, followed quickly by her retinue.

As the karas-tengu ship began to depart, Ataru finally broke free from Lum, and once more, began running after the ship, calling for them to take him, too. Lum braced for take-off, then stopped herself, folded her arms, and turned away, her body shaking with tension. "I won't chase after him... I won't... I won't... I..." Suddenly, her shoulders sagged, and she heaved a resigned sigh. "Oh, what's the use," she said wearily, and launched herself after Ataru's distant form with a plaintive "Daaaaaarliiiiiiiiiing!".

Turning back to his sister, Shutaro noticed a small movement out of the corner of his eye. As he looked more closely, he saw Yopparai poke his head out of one of the few bushes left standing. "She's gone, isn't she?" he asked, still whispering. "I don't suppose you'd have any ideas where I could lay low for a while, say... twenty or thirty years?"

Before Shutaro could answer, the bush, with the karas-tengu still in it, was lifted and heaved far into the distance. Much to his surprise, Shutaro found himself face to face with Asuka Mizunokoji. The young girl, dressed in full armor, hurried past Shutaro with a soft sob of "Onii-chan!". She knelt in front of Ryoko, her face a study of tender concern.

"Is he all right, Ryoko-chan?" Asuka asked, distraught.

"Yes, of course, dear," Ryoko said encouragingly, patting Asuka's still gauntleted hand. "He'll be fine. He's just a little tired, that's all. Once he's rested a bit, my kuroki will bring him home, good as new." She reached out her hand to Shutaro, who came, despite his misgivings, to join the other three. "Big Brother, would you be so kind as to see Asuka-chan home?" She placed Asuka's hand on Shutaro's arm, arranging them thus in a somewhat strange, but pleasant, picture. "Ataru Moroboshi is, after all, still at large here in the forest, and other men might still be about."

"Men!" Asuka's hand tightened convulsively on Shutaro's arm, whose face turned ashen at the sound and feel of crunching bone. Asuka

looked wide eyed at Shutaro, who, despite all, felt himself somewhat compensated for the pain. "You won't let them near me, will you?"

"Eff... cersse... nott, my deear," Shutaro said, his teeth clenched, straining to keep his voice calm. He began to lead her out of the clearing, while trying to coax her hand free from his rapidly-swelling arm. "Come... along. We'll... get you home."

As Ryoko watched the two depart, Tobimaro moaned once more. Ryoko stroked his hair and whispered soothingly to him. "Don't worry, my heart. You're safe with me now. Everything will be fine - just fine." As she bent to kiss him lightly on the forehead, Tobimaro stirred. His eyes opened slightly, then shot wide in terror as Ryoko looked deeply, soulfully into them.

"After all, my love," she murmured. "I hold no grudges."

A single scream shook the nearby grove of bamboo. Then all was silent once again.

THE END

End
file.